

THE NEW HISTORY.

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I propose to discuss in this paper the value of historical study. The question has long haunted me and certainly merits a more careful consideration than it has, so far as I can discover, hitherto received. It will be impossible to do more here than to analyze the problem and briefly state the general conclusions which that analysis suggests.

The older traditional type of historical writing was narrative in character. Its chief aim was to tell a tale or story by setting forth a succession of events and introducing the prominent actors who participated in them. It was a branch of polite literature, competing with the drama and fiction, from which, indeed, it differed often only in the limitations which the writer was supposed to place upon his fancy. As Professor McMaster has recently said: "It was by no mere accident that Motley began his literary career with a novel called "Merry-Mount," and Parkman his with "Vassall Morton." These bespoke their type of mind. The things that would interest them in history would be, not the great masses of toiling men, not the silent revolutions by which nations pass from barbarism to civilization, from ignorance to knowledge, from poverty to wealth, from feebleness to power, but the striking figures of history, great kings and queens, the leaders of armies, men renowned for statescraft, and the dramatic incidents in the life of nations. Each must have his hero and his villain, his plots, conspiracies and bloody wars. Just as Froude had his Henry VIII.; just as Macaulay had his William III., Carlyle his Robespierre and Cromwell, and Thiers his Napoleon, so Motley had his William of Orange and Philip of Spain; Prescott his Cortez, Pizarro, Ferdinand and Isabella; and Parkman his Pontiac, Frontenac and La Salle. History as viewed by writers of this

school is a series of dramas in each of which a few great men perform the leading parts and use the rest of mankind as their instruments."¹ The commonly accepted definition of history was long, "a record of past events" and these, naturally, the most startling and romantic and the best adapted for effective literary presentation. Doubtless there was some serious effort to describe conditions and institutions, since they formed the necessary setting for the events and anecdotes; sometimes they would even be assigned a place on their own intrinsic merits; but what may be called the epic ideal of history prevailed until perhaps fifty or sixty years ago when, owing to the influence of the modern scientific spirit, a very fundamental revolution became apparent.

Now let us review, by way of preliminary, what were deemed the advantages of the study of history of this older type. Lord Bolingbroke in his "Letters on the Study of History," written about 1737, says: "An application to any study that tends neither to make us better men and better citizens, is at best but a specious and ingenious sort of idleness; . . . and the knowledge we acquire by it is a creditable kind of ignorance, nothing more. This creditable kind of ignorance is, in my opinion, the whole benefit which the generality of men, even the most learned, reap from the study of history: and yet the study of history seems to me of all others the most proper to train us up to private and public virtue." History, he quite properly says, is read by most people as a form of amusement, as they might play at cards. Some devote themselves to history in order to adorn their conversation with historical allusions,—and the argument is still current that one should know enough of the past to understand literary references to noteworthy events and persons. The less imaginative scholar, Bolingbroke complains, satisfies himself with making fair copies of foul manuscripts and explaining hard words for the benefit of others, or with constructing more or less fantastic chronologies based upon very insecure data. Over against these Bolingbroke places those who have perceived that history is after all only "philosophy teaching by example." For "the exam-

¹"The Present State of Historical Writing in America," reprinted from the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* for October, 1910; Worcester, 1910, p. 18.

ples which we find in history, improved by the lively descriptions and the just explanations or censures of historians," will, he believes, have a much better and more permanent effect than declamation, or the "dry ethics of mere philosophy." Moreover, to summarize his argument, we can by the study of history enjoy in a short time a wide range of experience at the expense of other men and without risk to ourselves. History enables us "to live with the men who lived before us, and we inhabit countries that we never saw. Place is enlarged, and time prolonged in this manner: so that the man who applies himself early to the study of history may acquire in a few years, and before he sets foot in the world, not only a more extended knowledge of mankind but the experience of more centuries than any of the patriarchs saw." Our own personal experience is doubly defective; we are born too late to see the beginning, and we die too soon to see the end of many things. History supplies in a large measure these defects.

There is of course little originality in Bolingbroke's plea for history's usefulness in making wiser and better men and citizens. Polybios had seen in history a guide for statesmen and military commanders; and the hope that the conspicuous moral victories and defeats of the past would serve to arouse virtue and discourage vice has been urged by innumerable chroniclers as the main justification of their enterprises. To-day, however, one would rarely find a historical student who would venture to recommend statesmen, warriors and moralists to place any confidence whatsoever in historical analogies and warnings, for the supposed analogies usually prove illusive on inspection and the warnings, impertinent. Whether or no Napoleon was ever able to make any practical use in his own campaigns of the accounts he had read of those of Alexander and Cæsar, it is quite certain that Admiral Togo would have derived no useful hints from Nelson's tactics at Alexandria or Trafalgar. Our situation is so novel that it would seem as if political and military precedents of even a century ago could have no possible value. As for our present "anxious morality," as Maeterlinck calls it, it seems equally clear that the sinful extravagances of Sardanapalus and Nero, and the conspicuous public virtue of Aristides and the Horatii, are alike impotent to promote it.

In addition to the supposed uses of history mentioned by Bolingbroke there was the possibility of tracing the ways of God to man. Augustine had furnished the first great example of this type of narrative in his "City of God" and thereafter history had very commonly been summoned to the support of Christian theology. Bossuet, writing for the Dauphin in the latter part of the seventeenth century, says: "Mais souvenez-vous, Monseigneur, que ce long enchaînement des causes particulières qui font et défont les empires dépend des ordres secrets de la Providence. Dieu tient du plus haut des cieux les rênes de tous les royaumes; il a tous les coeurs en sa main; tantôt il retient les passions, tantôt il leur lâche la bride, et par là il remue tout le genre humain. Veut-il faire des conquérants; il fait marcher l'épouvante devant eux, et il inspire à eux et à leurs soldats une hardiesse invincible. Veut-il faire des législateurs; il leur envoie son esprit de sagesse et de prévoyance; il leur fait prévenir les maux qui menacent les états, et poser les fondements de la tranquillité publique. Il connoît la sagesse humaine, toujours courte par quelque endroit; il l'éclaire, il étend ses vues, et puis l'abandonne à ses ignorances; il l'aveugle, il la précipite, il la confond par elle-même; elle s'enveloppe, elle s'embarrasse dans ses propres subtilités, et ses précautions lui sont un piège. Dieu exerce par ce moyen ses redoutables jugements, selon les règles de sa justice toujours infallible."² It was assumed by such writers as Bossuet that in spite of the confessedly secret and mysterious character of God's dispensations it was nevertheless quite possible for the skilled theologian to trace them with edifying confidence and interpret them as divine sanctions and disapprovals, blessings and punishments, trials and encouragements. For various reasons, which it is unnecessary to review here, this particular method of dealing with the past and deriving useful lessons from it finds few educated defenders at the present day.

In the eighteenth century a considerable number of "philosophies of history" appeared and enjoyed great popularity. They were the outcome of a desire to seize and explain the general trend of man's past. Of course this had been the purpose of Augustine and Bossuet

²"Discours sur l'histoire universelle," concluding chapter.

but Voltaire devoted his "Philosophie de l'histoire" (1765) mainly to discrediting religion as commonly accepted; and instead of offering any particular theory of the past he satisfied himself with picking out what he calls *les vérités utiles*. He addresses Madame du Châtelet in the opening of his "Essai sur les Moeurs et l'esprit des nations" as follows: Vous ne cherchez dans cette immensité que ce qui mérite d'être connu de vous; l'esprit, les moeurs, les usages des nations principales, appuyés des faits qu'il n'est pas permis d'ignorer. Le but de ce travail n'est pas de savoir en quelle année un prince indigne d'être connu succéda a un prince barbare chez une nation grossière. Si l'on pouvait avoir le malheur de mettre dans sa tête la suite chronologique de toutes les dynasties, on ne saurait que des mots. Autant il faut connaître les grandes actions des souverains qui ont rendu leurs peuples meilleurs et plus heureux, autant on peut ignorer le vulgaire des rois, qui ne pourrait que charger la mémoire. . . . Dans tous ces recueils immenses qu'on ne peut embrasser, il faut se borner et choisir. C'est un vaste magasin où vous prendrez ce qui est à votre usage.³ Voltaire's reactions on the past were naturally just what might have been expected from his attitude toward his own times. He drew from "le vaste magasin" those things that he needed for his great campaign, and in this he did well, however uncritical his criticism may at times seem to a modern historical student.

Herder in his little work, "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit. Beitrag zur vielen Beiträgen des Jahrhunderts" (1774), condemns the general lightheartedness and superficiality of Voltaire and other contemporary writers who were, he thought, vainly attempting to squeeze the story of the universe and man into their puny philosophic categories. Ten years later he wrote his larger work, "Ideen zur Geschichte der Menschheit," in which he strove to give some ideal unity and order to the vast historic process, beginning with a consideration of the place of the earth among the other heavenly bodies, and of man's relations to the vegetable and animal kingdoms. "If," he says, "there be a god in nature, there is in history too; for man is himself a part of creation, and in his wildest extravagances and passions must obey laws not

³ "Avant propos."

less excellent and beautiful than those by which all the celestial bodies move. Now as I am persuaded that man is capable of knowing, and destined to attain the knowledge of, everything that he ought to know, I step freely and confidently from the tumultuous scenes through which we have been wandering to inspect the beautiful and sublime laws of nature by which they have been governed." Humanity is the end of human nature, he held, and the human race is destined to proceed through various degrees of civilization in various mutations; but the permanency of its welfare is founded solely and essentially on reason and justice. But it is a natural law that "if a being or system of beings be forced out of the permanent position of its truth, goodness and beauty it will again approach it by its internal powers, either in vibrations or in an asymptote, as out of this state it finds no stability."⁴ Herder formulates from time to time a considerable number of other "laws" which he believes emerge from the confusion of the past. Whatever we may think of these "laws" he constantly astonishes the modern reader not only by his penetrating criticism of the prevailing philosophy of his time but by flashes of deep historical insight. He is clearly enough the forerunner of the "Romantic" tendency that culminated in Hegel's celebrated "Philosophy of History" in which the successive migrations and national incarnations of the *Weltgeist* are traced to its final and highest medium of expression, the German people.

These genial speculations of the philosophers of history rested usually upon no very careful study of historical sources and their conclusions seem to us now very hazardous, even if we grant the correctness of the data upon which they relied. It was inevitable that the historical students who, about the middle of the nineteenth century, commenced to feel the influence of the general scientific spirit of the period, should begin to look very sourly upon the earlier attempts to bring order and beauty out of a mass of historic assertions which were so commonly either erroneous or unproved, and to establish laws for events which one could not be sure had ever happened. The reaction against the dreams of the philosophers of history was, and is still, very clear. What may be called, for convenience, the "scientific" modern school of historians believe that history,

⁴ Opening sections of Book XV.

like all other forms of scientific research, should be pursued first and foremost for its own sake. The facts must be verified and classified by the expert, without regard to any possible bearing which his discoveries may have upon our attitude toward life and the proper way of conducting it. Attempts to draw lessons from the past have, it is plausibly maintained, produced so reckless a disregard of scientific accuracy and criticism, that the prudent historian will confine himself to determining "how it really was"—an absorbing and delicate task which will tax his best powers.

Along with more exacting criticism and the repudiation of supernatural considerations and explanations came a revulsion against the older epic or dramatic interest in the past. The essential interest and importance of the normal and homely elements in human life became apparent. The scientific historian no longer dwells by preference on the heroic, spectacular, and romantic episodes, but strives to reconstruct past *conditions*. This last point is of such importance that we must stop over it a moment. History is not infrequently still defined as a record of past *events* and the public still expect from the historian a *story* of the past. But the conscientious historian has come to realize that he cannot aspire to be a good story teller for the simple reason that if he tells no more than he has good reasons for believing to be true his story is usually very fragmentary and uncertain. Fiction and drama are perfectly free to conceive and adjust detail so as to meet the demands of art, but the historian should always be conscious of the rigid limitations placed upon him. If he confines himself to an honest and critical statement of a series of events as described in his sources it is usually too deficient in vivid authentic detail to make a presentable story. The historian is coming to see that his task is essentially different from that of the man of letters. His place is among the scientists. He is at liberty to use only his scientific imagination, which is surely different from a literary imagination. It is his business to make those contributions to our general understanding of mankind in the past which his training in the investigation of the records of past human events especially fit him to make. He esteems the events he finds recorded not for their dramatic interest but for the light that they cast on the normal and prevalent conditions which

gave rise to them. It makes no difference how dry a chronicle may be if the occurrences that it reports can be brought into some assignable relation with the more or less permanent habits and environment of a particular people or person. If it be the chief function of history to show how things come about—and something will be said of this matter later—then events become for the historian first and foremost evidence of general conditions and changes affecting considerable numbers of people. In this respect history is only following the example set by the older natural sciences—zoology dwells on general principles not on exceptional and startling creatures or on the lessons which their habits suggest for man. Mathematics no longer lingers over the mystic qualities of numbers, nor does the astronomer seek to read our personal fate in the positions of the planets. Scientific truth has shown itself able to compete with fiction, and there appears to be endless fascination for the mind in the contemplation of what former ages would have regarded as the most vulgar and tiresome commonplace.

In addition to the characteristics of modern history just enumerated two great historical discoveries of the latter half of the nineteenth century have served still further to revolutionize our attitude towards the past of mankind. Curiously enough neither of these discoveries are due to historians. I refer to the well substantiated fact that man is sprung from the lower animals, and secondly, that he has in all probability been sojourning on the globe for several hundreds of thousands of years. These discoveries have gravely influenced all speculations in regard to the earlier history of our race and have placed the so-called "historical period" in a new setting. The historian no longer believes that he knows anything about man from the very first but realizes that what is commonly called history comprises only a very recent and very brief period in man's development. All history is modern history from the standpoint of prehistoric anthropology. Lastly, a group of anthropological, psychological and social sciences have made their appearance during the past fifty years which are furnishing the historian with many new notions about man and are disabusing his mind of many old misapprehensions in regard to races, religion, social organization, and the psychology of progress. The older historians used such words as

race, human nature, culture, religion, church, people, Renaissance, Reformation, Revolution, almost as if they were the names of animistic forces. These terms must be analyzed and reinterpreted in the light of the newer sciences of man.

The kind of history, accordingly, the practical value of which we shall attempt roughly to estimate, and which for convenience sake we may call the "new" history, is scientific in its methods, exacting in regard to the inferences it makes from its material; it rejects supernatural explanations and an anthropocentric conception of the universe; it studies by preference the normal and long enduring rather than the transient and exceptional; it accepts the descent of man from the lower animals, many of whose psychological traits he shares; it recognizes that man has lived on the earth for not merely five thousand but perhaps for five hundred thousand years; it avails itself, when fully abreast of the time, of all the suggestions and criticisms that are constantly being contributed by the newly developed sciences of anthropology, comparative, social and functional psychology, comparative religion, etc.⁵ So much for the attitude of mind of the modern historian who realizes the changes which have overtaken his subject during the past fifty or sixty years.

But if "history" be re-defined as no longer a record of past events but the attempt to describe with all possible scientific precision what we know of the nature and conditions of human institutions, conduct and thought in the past, does not the term become hopelessly vague—as vague at least as the term natural science? Does not the historian sacrifice his only obvious clue to the past when he gives up tracing a succession of conspicuous events, for only these lend themselves to an obvious and orderly selection and arrangement? Every human interest and achievement has its history, every accomplished, and every vain dream. It would seem as if every attempt to deal with the past must necessarily imply an arbitrary selection dictated by the investigator's particular humor and tastes. This situation is still disguised by the continued popularity of a *standard* variety of history, mainly political, dynastic and military, transmitted to us from the past and taught in our

⁵ See "The Relation of History to the Newer Sciences of Man" in *The Journal for Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. VIII., No. 6, March, 1911, where I have elaborated this point.

schools and colleges and presented to the adult public in many well known older and newer treatises.

In order to appreciate the arbitrary nature of the selection of historic facts offered in these standard text books and treatises, let us suppose that a half dozen alert and well trained minds had never happened to be biased by the study of any outline of history and had by some happy and incredible fortune never perused a "standard" historical work. Let us suppose that they had nevertheless learned a good deal about the past of mankind directly from the vast range of sources that we now possess, both literary and archæological. Lastly, let us assume that they were all called upon to prepare independently a so-called general history, suitable for use in the higher schools. They would speedily discover that there was no single obvious rule for determining what should be included in their review of the past. Having no tradition to guide them, each would select what he deemed most important for the young to know of the past. Writing in the twentieth century, they would all be deeply influenced by the interests and problems of the day. Battles and sieges and the courts of kings would scarcely appeal to them. Probably it would occur to none of them to mention the battle of Issus, the Samnite wars, the siege of Numantia by the Romans, the advent of Hadrian, the Italian enterprises of Otto I., the six wives of Henry VIII. or the invasion of Holland by Louis XIV. It is tolerably safe to assume that none of these events, which are recorded in practically all of our manuals to-day, would be considered by any one of our writers as he thought over all that man had done, and thought, and suffered, and dreamed, through thousands of years. All of them would agree that what men had known of the world in which they lived, or had thought to be their duty, or what they made with their hands, or the nature and style of their buildings, public and private, would any of them be far more valuable to rehearse than the names of their rulers and the conflicts in which they engaged. Each writer would accordingly go his own way. He would look back on the past for explanations of what he found most interesting in the present and would endeavor to place his readers in a position to participate intelligently in the life of their own time. The six manuals when completed would not only differ greatly from one another but would

have little resemblance to the *fable convenue* which is currently accepted as embodying the elements of history.

History in its broadest sense, is, in short, nothing less than the experiences of our race, so far as we can determine or surmise them. And what uses are we to make of the experiences of the race? The same kind of use that we make of our own individual history. We may question it as we question our memory of our personal acts, situations and past ideals. But those things that we recall from the superabundant fund of our own experiences vary continually with our moods and preoccupations. We instinctively adjust our recollections to our immediate needs and aspirations and ask from the past light on the particular problems that face us. Just as our individual history is thus not immutable but owes its value to its adaptability, so with the history of mankind. As Maeterlinck has beautifully said, with increased insight, "historic facts which seem to be graven forever on the stone and bronze of the past will assume an entirely different aspect, will return to life and leap into movement, bringing vaster and more courageous counsels." History is then not fixed and reducible to outlines and formulas but it is ever alive and ever changing, and it will, if we will but permit it, illuminate and explain our lives as nothing else can do. For our lives, are made up almost altogether of the past and each age should be free to select from the annals of the past those matters which have a bearing on the matters it has specially at heart.

If we test our personal knowledge of history by its usefulness to us, in giving us a better grasp on the present and a clearer notion of our place in the development of mankind, we shall perceive forthwith that a great part of what we have learned from historical works has entirely escaped our memory, for the simple reason that we have never had the least excuse for recollecting it. The career of Ethelred the Unready, the battle of Poitiers, and the negotiations leading up to the treaty of Nimwegen are for most of us forgotten formulæ, no more helpful, except in a remote contingency, than the logarithm of the number 57. The ideal history for each of us would be those facts of past human experience to which we should have recourse oftenest to our endeavors to understand ourselves and our fellows. No one account would meet the needs of all, but all would agree

that much of what now passes for the elements of history meet the needs of none.

It would take too long to attempt an analysis of the value of a genetic treatment of the elements in our social life. It is perhaps the greatest single discovery of modern times that we understand a situation best through its history, and this discovery has revolutionized every branch of organic and social science. Indeed we ordinarily first get a fairly comprehensive notion of a given phenomenon by tracing its origin and development, whether it be the human backbone, the order of St. Benedict, the stock exchange, the Wagnerian opera, or the doctrine of *stare decisis*. In many cases the knowledge of the history of an institution not uncommonly gravely affects our attitude toward it. The United States Senate looks different to one familiar with the history of the bicameral system and to one who is not. The Puritan sabbath could never have sustained a critical historical examination. One's views of democracy, or of the present laws of property, or of the prevailing economic organization, can readily be deeply affected by a study of the earlier conditions which lie back of present conditions. History has a disintegrating effect on current prejudices which is as yet scarcely appreciated. It makes both for understanding and for intellectual emancipation as nothing else can.

Obviously history must be rewritten, or rather, innumerable current issues must be given their neglected historic background. Our present so-called histories do not ordinarily answer the questions we would naturally and insistently put to them. When we contemplate the strong demand that women are making for the right to vote, we ask ourselves how did the men win the vote? The historians we consult have scarcely asked themselves that question and so do not answer it. We ask how did our courts come to control legislation in the exceptional and extraordinary manner they do? We look in vain in most histories for a reply. No one questions the inalienable right of the historian to interest himself in any phase of the past that he chooses. It is only to be wished that a greater number of historians had greater skill in hitting upon those phases of the past which serve us best in understanding the most vital problems of the present.